

**On Identity and Invisibility:
The Tragic Mulatto Theme in
Andrew Niccol's *Gattaca***

Carolyn Tyjewski

"I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me." -
Ralph Waldo Ellison, *The Invisible Man*

"Looks don't mean much. The things that makes us different is how we
think. What we believe is important, the ways we look at life." - John
Langston Gwaltney, *Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America*

There are plenty of names to go around, to describe/label the invisible ones. A person with hidden disabilities, mulatto, bisexual, misfit, transgendered, multiracial, transsexual, mutt, hybrid, freak among freaks. We are blamed for everything from spreading AIDS to heterosexuals, to destroying the moral fabric of America, to, until a recent United States Supreme Court decision, diverting funds away from the "truly disabled" (Colker, xi). Yet and still we do not exist, often falling between the gaps in how the law is written and how it is perceived by a society that thrives upon dualisms: the extreme experience. As Ruth Colker points out, "The invisibility of hybrids reflects the false belief that we can visually identify who is female, gay or lesbian, African-American, or disabled" (xiii). The offhand comment that, for example, "...the blind, however, are easily seen" (Goffman, 48) made by academics and others helped create and continues to perpetuate this perverted joke of visible invisibility. However, the visualness of this society's culture makes media images the greater teaching tool. For according to this culture, seeing truly is believing.

This essay examines one of the common minority representations within literature and film - that of the passing or tragic mulatto narrative - by looking at the 1997 futuristic film *Gattaca*. But herein lies the irony: passing is, by nature and by definition, invisible. To pass is to be unseen. Yet, in films such as *Gattaca* and fiction such as James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* what is invisible is made "visible" through the telling of the tale; thus negating the possibility of passing. I will examine how *Gattaca* parallels James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* and Nella Larsen's "Passing." Specifically, I will be comparing these two texts to the film in relation to how each addresses the issue of passing and with regard to the identity politics of the main characters who can pass. Given the brevity of this essay, it is by no means an exhaustive examination of these issues or of the film. It is merely a starting point for, hopefully, broadening discussions of identity politics and passing.

In *Gattaca*, Vincent Anton Freeman, the narrator, chooses to pass and the audience is given his perspective throughout most of the film. "The most unremarkable of events. Jerome Morrow, navigator first-class, is about to embark on a one year manned mission to Titan. . . . No, there is truly nothing remarkable about the progress of Jerome Morrow. Except that I am not Jerome Morrow" (Niccol, 1995). Taking its cue from African American literature, *Gattaca* uses the slave narrative form to tell the tale of how Vincent became a "free man" - Vincent's surname marking his passing.

Like the narrator of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, Vincent's tone is ironic. Both narrators recognize the irony in disclosing to the audience - the invisible becoming visible. However, Vincent's irony is also based upon his childhood and adult awareness of his social, legal and personal identity and the recognition that the societal prejudices and constraints placed upon himself, Irene, Jerome, etc. are a social creation, getting "discrimina-

tion down to a science." For although there is nothing remarkable about Jerome making a trip to Titan, according to society, Vincent does not have the genetic potential to be alive let alone be navigator first-class at *Gattaca*. This awareness of his social and legal identity, as well as his self-identification as an "in-valid" (person with a disability), is far different from the experience, knowledge of the legal, social and personal identification of the narrator of the Ex-Coloured Man's as an African American.

Johnson's protagonist is unaware of his legal and social identities as a child (Johnson, 16-19). However, Vincent describes his early conception of self as, "From an early age, I came to think of myself as others thought of me...chronically ill" (Niccol, 1995). Unlike the narrator of Johnson's fiction, Vincent never endured the emotional "spanking" that the narrator describes as one of "the tragedies of life" (Johnson, 20). Kawash notes the textual relationships the Ex-Coloured Man has are "not the immediacy of a common black identity ('we are the same') but an alienating distance between himself and others ('we are not the same') that is the condition for his understanding of blackness" (Kawash, 65). On the other hand, Vincent does not create a distance between himself and other people with disabilities within the film. For example, the image of Vincent placing his hand over the six-fingered hand of the pianist's portrait - a picture of a pair of hands covering a face, not the artist's face as one would normally see in front of the theater - mirrors the failed attempt to become blood brothers with his biological sibling (Niccol, 1997). It is an image, a symbol, of recognized kinship/identity between himself and a man he has just heard perform (Niccol, 1997). To use Kawash's terminology, it is the immediacy of a common disability identity - "we are the same" - that informs Vincent's consciousness of what it is to be in-valid.

Although both protagonists choose to pass, their self-identification as well as their knowledge and understanding of their social and legal identification are very different. Johnson's narrator recognizes the legal and social definitions of Coloured (other) and that they pertain to him. However, he self-identifies as white (the norm). On the other hand, Niccol's protagonist self-identifies as an in-valid (other). Although he acknowledges the existence of the legal and societal definitions of him (not the norm), Vincent does not recognize them as valid in terms of what is and is not possible. Unlike society and his female counterpart in the film, Vincent recognizes that "two or twelve, it's how you play" (Niccol, 1997).

In contrast, Irene Cassini, Vincent's female counterpart, believes in society's definition of her as an invalid. She, like Vincent, has a heart condition. However, she "is the authority on what is and is not possible" (Niccol, 1997). For her, like society, individuals have a measurable potential based upon one's genes. "No one exceeds his potential" (Niccol, 1997). Even though Irene believes in society's definition of people with disabilities, she does not self-identify as a person with a disability. She identifies as "luckier than most, not as lucky as some" (Niccol, 1997). In this way, Irene distances herself from other people with disabilities. Like Johnson's narrator, her knowledge of people with disabilities is through alienation. Her understanding of disability stems from the distancing - "we are not the same" - between herself and other characters with disabilities.

Although Irene shares a similar lack of self identification with what society and the law define her and Johnson's protagonist to be (the other) and she, like both narrators can pass, Irene chooses not to pass. In this way she parallels Irene Redfield in Nella Larsen's "Passing." Both Irene's choose not to pass. However, Redfield, like Vincent, does not accept societal definitions while, at the same time, recognizing their existence. Redfield is "not ashamed of being a Negro, or even of having it declared" (Larsen, 150). Cassini, however, keeps it to herself, only mentioning it once to let Vincent - passing as Jerome - know that he may not want to be with her because of her "flaw." Although the only visual representation of her disability, her otherness, is a decorative yet discreet pillbox, Irene does not hide her disability. Yet and still, she is ashamed of it. However, by correcting assumptions made based upon the ocular evidence when they are verbalized and their openness about their legal and

social identities in their respective communities, both Irene's choose not to pass.

In *Fear of the Dark: 'Race,' Gender and Sexuality in the Cinema*, Lola Young identifies some of these basic characteristics of a passing narrative that demonstrate the difference between someone who can pass and someone who is passing. She notes, "'Passing' requires the denial of temporal continuities: the past, the present and the future represent danger and have to be disavowed and constantly reconstructed" (Young, 94). As noted previously, neither Irene is in denial of their past, present or future. Thus, according to Young's analysis of passing or tragic mulatto narratives, Irene Redfield and Irene Cassini are not passing. However, the narrators in *Gattaca* and *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* are passing.

Both the Ex-Coloured Man and Vincent must discard their past (family, friends, childhood memories, etc.) and create a "new" life (new name, new past, etc.) as, to use Niccol's terminology, a valid or made man (Johnson, 1976; Niccol, 1997). Vincent literally begins to erase himself from existence at the age of ten and this erasure is completed when he tears his image from the family photo (Niccol, 1997). These demonstrative forms of erasure are a response to a societal definition of him as "chronically ill" - the stereotypes of what it means to be a person with a disability (Niccol, 1997). By erasing himself, he is rejecting society's construction of him as invalid.

On the other hand, Ex-Coloured Man's erasure begins the day he finds out society identifies him as black (Johnson, 20-21). Although he insists that the experience transformed his thoughts, words and actions from white to black (Johnson, 21), the idea that he had to BECOME black - that this changed everything about who he had been - suggests that the experience actually made him transfer societal stereotypes - the societal definition of what it means to be "black" - to himself. Unlike Vincent, the Ex-Coloured Man's erasure began by a transference of societal and legal identities to himself instead of a rejection of them.

For both narrators the fear of being exposed is the denial of their present. Vincent's denial of the present exhibits itself in all the vials, special urine pouches and blood saches of "Jerome's superior matter" he wears in fear of being sequenced (Niccol, 1997). For the Ex-Coloured Man, it is his obsession with work and money - avoiding human contact - and his internal obsession with colour - his otherness (Johnson, 1976). Both men fear exposure and what exposure would do to their respective lives. However, in fearing exposure, they limit themselves and, in a sense, cease to live.

The danger in the future is the fear of reproduction - creation of another hybrid. The future for Johnson's narrator is his children. Neither of his children know of the "mark" the narrator bears and he is determined that they shall not wear it (Johnson, 210-11). However determined he may be to keep his children from having the "burden" of race attached to them, his autobiography negates that possibility. In addition, his determination has rendered him celibate and isolated from the rest of the world (Johnson, 210-11), rendering him socially dead. For Vincent, having sex with Irene creates a fear of a potential "mistake" that, the next morning in paranoia, he feels the need to scrub with a rock to get clean (Niccol, 1997). This act not only reflects his need to continue the present denial of self, but also symbolizes his repentance for his transgressions - people with disabilities are not, according to society, sexual and should not procreate (Morris, 1991). Even though Vincent identifies as a person with a disability, he still has internalized some of his own oppression. Neither narrator can afford to leave any trace of their passing. Therefore, any form of intimacy becomes dangerous. As Young notes, "the 'passing' subject can never settle" (Young, 94).

Recent texts critiquing passing have suggested that passing somehow challenges the idea that there is only one definitive identification for an individual within each identification category. In other words, passing challenges the "one drop" idea that an individual can have only one gender, one race, one sexual preference, and either does or does not have a disability. For example, Ginsburg states, "both the process and the discourse of passing challenge the essentialism that is often the foundation of identity politics. ...[disclosing] the truth that identi-

ties are not singularly true or false but multiple and contingent" (Ginsburg, 4). Although it is true that identities are multiple and contingent, the process of passing cannot challenge the status quo. After all, one cannot undermine an essentialist belief by becoming invisible.

Rather, it is the ability to pass, not the passing, that challenges the dichotomous legal and societal identifications of disability, gender, race and sexual preference. After all, Vincent and the Ex-Coloured Man only challenge the status quo by coming out, telling their tales. Irene Cassini and Irene Redfield challenge it by simply existing in the text. And all four characters only demand examination of the status quo to the extent that they individually challenge/disregard societal stereotypes in word and deed. Of course, all of this is predicated upon the audiences willingness to hear what it is they are seeing. For although Gwaltney's source is correct in saying that, in terms of legalities, "Looks don't mean much" (Gwaltney, 5), society believes in the ocular. Therefore, invisibility is only revolutionary when it is seen.

References

- Colker, Ruth. *Hybrid: Bisexuals, Multiracials, and Other Misfits under American Law*. New York: New York UP, 1996.
- Davis, Floyd James. *Who is Black? One Nation's Definition*. University Park: Penn State UP, 1991.
- Davis, Lennard. *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body*. New York: Verso, 1995.
- Ellison, Ralph Waldo. *The Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage, 1980.
- Garland Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Columbia UP, 1997.
- Ginsberg, Elaine. "The Politics of Passing." *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*. Ed. Elaine Ginsberg. Durham: Duke UP, 1996: 1-18.
- Goffman, Erving. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. New York: Simon, 1963.
- Gwaltney, John. *Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America*. New York: Random House, 1980.
- Johnson, James Weldon. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*. New York: Knopf, 1976.
- Kawash, Samira. "The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man: (Passing for) Black Passing for White." *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*. Ed. Elaine Ginsberg. Durham: Duke UP, 1996: 59-60.
- Larsen, Nella. "Passing." *Quicksand and Passing*. Ed. Deborah McDowell. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1986: 137-246.
- Leab, Daniel. *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience of Motion Pictures*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975.
- Mast, Gerald and Bruce Kawin. *A Short History of the Movies*. 5th edition. New York: MacMillan, 1992.
- Morris, Jenny. *Pride Against Prejudice: Transforming Attitude of Disability*. Philadelphia: New Society, 1991.
- Niccol, Andrew. *Gattaca*. Produced by: Danny Devito, Michael Shamberg, Stacey Sher. Columbia Pictures Corporation. 1997.
- Norden, Martin. *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1994.
- Scales-Trent, Judy. *Notes of a White Black Woman: Race, Color, Community*. University Park: Penn State UP, 1995.
- Young, Lola. *Fear of the Dark: 'Race,' Gender and Sexuality in the Cinema*. New York: Routledge, 1996.